

By the end of October, the Association was ready to report to Council that there was substantial interest in the business community to undertake the restoration work and that the services of both a general contractor and an electrician had been secured. It was the conviction of the Association that the necessary building materials would be donated to the project. Despite the fact that there were no tangible assurances, this encouraging report provided enough comfort to the City Council that they granted yet another extension of the commencement deadline and Council began to talk about using the restored house as a formal reception area for the Mayor. This extension granted the project another 90 days to begin work or have the building torn down. However, there was no unanimous support for the project in the community. A number of businessmen in the lower blocks of King Street felt that the ramshackle and run down appearance of the building was hurting business and lowering property values.³⁴

In the following weeks the Association took its fundraising efforts seriously and announced a number of donations of materials for the project including paint and structural iron work and it was expected that actual work on the building would begin during the third week of November. The Association made an additional contribution to the Historical Society of over \$4,000 toward the costs of restoration.³⁵

At the Association's next meeting in November 1950, they heard a report from this special committee which presented a resolution recommending only restoration of the building and not reconstruction and thanking Grigg for his "interest and efforts toward the restoration of the Ramsay House." Ford had written Grigg the day of the meeting to thank him for meeting with him, the Association's special committee, and the Historical Society to go through the plans that had been prepared up to that time. He said he would bring everything to the attention of the Association membership: "I am sure when these facts are called to the attention of the Association they will be deeply grateful to you and realize the injustice to you of remarks made at our October 9th meeting."³⁶

³⁴ Dorothy H. Kabler, "Council May Act on Ramsay House", AG, 10/24/1950, p.1; Dorothy H. Kabler, "Ramsay House Project Continued", AG, 10/25/1950, p.1.

³⁵ "New Contributions Spur Plan for Restoration of Ramsay House; All-Out Appeal is Sounded", AG, 11/2/1950, p.1; Dorothy H. Kabler, "Alexandria Association to Hear Talks on Preserving Antiquities Monday Night at Gadsby Tavern", AG, 11/11/1950, p.3; Dorothy H. Kabler, "Ramsay House Project Praised", AG, 11/14/1950, p.1.

³⁶ Report of the Special Committee to Expedite Restoration of the Ramsay House, 11/13/1950 and Ford to Grigg, 11/13/1950, both Alexandria Association MMS Collection, Special Collections, Alexandria Library.

A contract for the actual construction was signed in early November and work began on gutting of the interior of the building. Newspaper accounts noted that the general contractor, Eugene and Clarence Simpson, would undertake the work without profit and that the principal use of the money that had been raised would be for materials. Even though the work was underway there still was no firm plan about the use of the building. The Historical Society continued to promote the idea that one room on the first floor would become a ceremonial office for the City's mayor. Beyond that ideas were quite vague, and the sharpest notion was that the other rooms would become repositories of "relics".³⁷

Progress was made on the restoration of the building and Grigg presented his plans for the restoration to the Old and Historic Alexandria District Board of Architectural Review in early December 1950. The Board, which included nationally known preservationists Delos Smith and Worth Bailey as well as Rebecca Ramsay Reese, approved Grigg's drawings, but not without extensive debate about the location of the front entry. Grigg succeeded in convincing the Board that the original entrance was from the east side and that the building did not originally have an entrance on North Fairfax Street.³⁸

Just a few days later Grigg gave an interview to the *Gazette* outlining the physical history of the building and his work in documenting the structure. He was still clearly rankled by the Association's criticism of a few months earlier and made a number of injudicious comments to the reporter. For example, he said, "why Ramsay House stands at all is a mystery to me. No builder in his right mind would use one by six rafters to support a roof — Ramsay House is simply defying the laws of gravity."³⁹ In other words, Grigg seemed to be saying that Ramsay House did not warrant the efforts that were going into saving it because it was not a good example of the Colonial craftsman's work to start with.

By early January 1951 the new foundation was ready to be installed, and its

³⁷ "Ramsay House Contract", *AG*, 11/10/1950; "Work Begins on Restoration of Historic Ramsay House", *AG*, 11/14/1950, p.1; "Work on Interior", *AG*, 11/17/1950, p.4; "Restoration of Old Ramsay House Begins", *Washington Star*, 11/18/1950, p.B-1. As the work began, John W. Cole, a long time Alexandria resident and ardent student of American architecture who lived at 208 North Fairfax Street, collected numerous samples of original architectural materials from Ramsay House including such items as shingles, nails, noggin and spikes. These materials have made their way into the Building Eighteenth Century Alexandria Database maintained by the Department of Planning and Zoning and will eventually be analyzed and compared to numerous other architectural fragments from eighteenth structures in Alexandria.

³⁸ Minutes of the Old and Historic Alexandria District Board of Architectural Review, 12/5/1950, Minute Book #1, p.79. Files of the Department of Planning and Zoning.

³⁹ Kristin Norling, "Modern Homes Built Better and with Better Materials, Ramsay House Architect Says", *AG*, 12/15/1950, p.3.

installation was done by masons who donated their services to the project through the Simpsons.

By February the Historical Society was boasting of the progress that had been made on the exterior of the building. Their pleasure, however, was muted somewhat by Col. Hellmuth who noted that while the exterior work would protect the interior from the weather, the Society was a long way from realizing the goal of funding the full restoration of the building.⁴⁰ In the late spring of 1951 the addition on the east side of the building had been removed because, according to Grigg, it was a "structure not in keeping with the original building." With its removal Grigg said he was able to determine that the original entrance to the building had faced the river and had not been on the Fairfax Street side of the building as was the case when work began on the building. Further, the removal of the addition showed that there had been dormer windows on the second floor, another factor, that convinced Grigg that the house had originally been oriented east toward the river because these dormer windows would have provided views of the river, according to his theory. The demolition of the addition also conveniently provided enough space to plant a garden which had been envisioned by Grigg as part of the overall project.⁴¹

By the end of May construction fencing had been removed from around the site and the "restored" "sheer white" facade began to become a fixture in downtown Alexandria. In fact, this "restoration" of the Ramsay House was widely seen as an important stimulus to the revitalization of the lower blocks of King Street with a number of retail merchants doing exterior fix-ups.⁴²

Progress on the Ramsay House slowed considerably once the exterior was essentially finished. By the middle of 1952 the City Council was once again called upon to put additional monies into the project so that work could begin on the interior. This additional money was accompanied by the now all too familiar debate about what use the building would serve once it was restored.

The ionic exterior restoration was so distinctive that the 1953 *Gazette* contest "Know Your City" offered gift certificates from a local furniture store to the first three readers who could correctly identify a photograph of the

⁴⁰ "Brick Masons Contribute to Ramsay House", *AG*, 1/8/1951, p.1; "Ramsay House Progresses", *AG*, 1/23/1951, p.8; "Ramsay House Charter Group Roll Opened", *AG*, 2/22/1951, p.1.

⁴¹ "Ramsay House Dormer Window Spaces Uncovered by Workers", *AG*, 5/24/1951, p.4.

⁴² "Painting Job Brightens King Street Block", *AG*, 7/14/1951, p.3.

building.⁴³

By the end of 1953 the City work force had expanded to such a degree that it was clearly apparent that additional space for city workers was needed. The City Manager believed that Ramsay House would be suitable as the headquarters for the Police Department as well as a ceremonial office for the Mayor, thus freeing up much needed office space in City Hall. The City Manager said that additional city money to finish the restoration of the building could be thus justified if the City were to make use of it for City offices.⁴⁴

This lively debate was interrupted when the Federal government unveiled a plan to build an elevated expressway through Alexandria that would take a route along Fairfax Street from the south near Hunting Creek where the roadway would be connected with a new bridge across the Potomac at Jones Point. This plan would result in the demolition of the Ramsay House as well as portions of City Hall making the discussion of the use of Ramsay House a moot issue. Citizens were outraged at such an idea, especially so because the City had received no inkling of the proposal until it was announced by state officials in December 1953.⁴⁵

The idea of an expressway through the heart of Alexandria was found wanting, and more wrangling over the use of the building continued. While individuals were opposed to using the house for headquarters for the Police Department, officially the Alexandria Association, the Historical Society and the Old Town Civic Association endorsed the idea with the caveat that the exterior be maintained in its "colonial character" and that one room be utilized for a ceremonial office for the mayor. These organizations endorsed the plan because they had not been able to raise sufficient funds to restore the building and saw the use of the building for municipal offices as a means of at least assuring the preservation of the building.⁴⁶

A few months later, in May 1954, the Chamber of Commerce came up with a unique way of publicizing the house. As part of an annual Clean Up -- Paint Up

⁴³ "Know Your City", AG, 7/7/1953, p.2.

⁴⁴ "Historic Shrines in Old City Attract Tour Guests from all Over the World", AG, 5/5/1952, p.18; Council appropriated \$1,988 to the Historical Society on 7/22/1952. "Council Seeks Program for Preservation", AG, 1/30/1953, p.1; "Million Dollar Building Plan Discussed by City Council", AG, 11/11/1953, p.1; Jim Buckley, "City Construction Program Declared Easy to Initiate", AG, 11/27/1953, p.2.

⁴⁵ "Beverly Opposes Road Plan, Says Expressway Would Blight Historic City", AG, 12/12/1953, p.1.

⁴⁶ "Council Acts to Reorganize Traffic Board", AG, 1/27/1954, p.8; The mayor was quoted as saying he was opposed to the idea of a ceremonial office in the Ramsay House and that "I can use the City Council Chambers."; "City Use of Ramsay House OK", AG, 1/29/1954, p.1.

week sponsored by Chambers throughout the country, the local chamber decided to see how fast Ramsay House could be painted and to broadcast the pseudo-event on television. Using donated paint and labor Ramsay House was given a new coat of white paint in one hour and forty five minutes on May 1, 1954. This was not a demonstration of the careful analysis and the recreation of historic paints that one normally associates with meticulous restoration projects. The Chamber made the most of the occasion and when "Miss City Beautiful of 1954" visited Alexandria the following month the Chamber proudly showed her the newly painted building.⁴⁷

Despite this burst of publicity, the Ramsay House continued to remain vacant and unfinished. One of the directors of the Alexandria Association who was concerned about the lack of progress on the building felt compelled in 1954 to write down his recollections showing how the Association had been the organizational impetus that was responsible for getting any work on Ramsay House underway. Edward Van Devanter wrote: "Although the Historical Society had been in existence since before the War, they had done nothing constructive to carry on this work [the restoration of Ramsay House]." He went on to say that it was not until April of 1947 that action on the project began to proceed. "It was at this time when the movement was dying on the vine, that the Alexandria Association put its shoulder to the wheel, and became involved in this project."⁴⁸

Finally in late 1955, as part of the City's overall capital improvement program the Council authorized sufficient funds to complete the remaining work. Grigg once again revised his working drawings, and a building permit was issued in December of 1955 for all the remaining interior and exterior work on the building.

It was expected that by the spring of 1956 the reconstruction work could be completed. As completion neared the Hunting Creek Garden Club volunteered to install a "Colonial" garden on the east side of the house. Grigg had designed the garden to complement his "restoration."⁴⁹

⁴⁷ "Repainting of Ramsay House to Feature Clean-Up Week", AG, 4/20/1954, p.5; "Ramsay House to Be Painted As Kick-Off for Annual Drive", AG, 4/23/1954, p.1; "That Ramsay House Painting is Re-Scheduled for Tomorrow", AG, 4/30/1954, p.1 (it rained the on April 24th when the painting had been originally scheduled); "Ramsay House is all A-Glow After 105-Minute Painting Job", AG, 5/3/1954, p.1; "Visit from a Beauty", AG, 6/14/1954, p.6.

⁴⁸ Van Devanter Memorandum, 1/25/1954. Alexandria Association MMS Collection, Special Collections, Alexandria Library.

⁴⁹ "Work Completion on Ramsay House Voted", AG, 10/12/1955, p.1; "Restoration of Ramsay House Garden Topic of Hunting Creek", AG, 1/19/1956, p.4. Building Permit #12477, 12/13/1955. Code Enforcement Bureau files, City of Alexandria.